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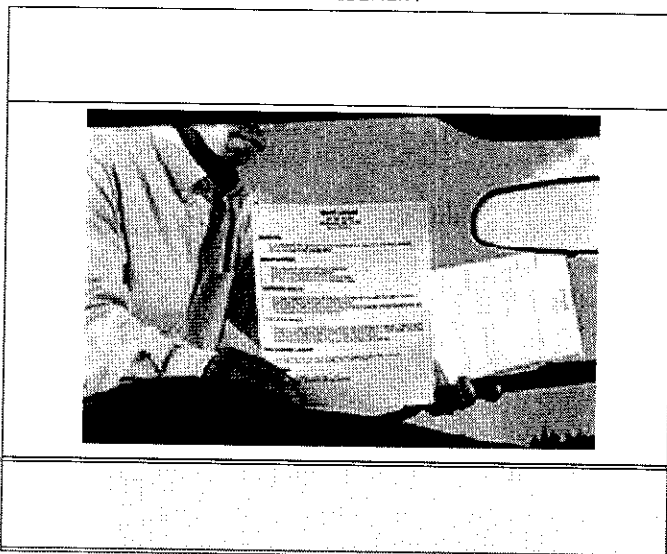
MBTA begins searching passengers

The Boston Globe

By Anthony Flint, Globe Staff | July 22, 2004

HOLBROOK -- The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority this morning became the first transit system in the country to screen passengers for explosives, as teams of MBTA officers stopped every 11th Boston-bound commuter at rail stations in Holbrook and Salem and tested handbags, briefcases and backpacks with a bomb-sensing machine.

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"It's kind of scary, seeing all these police here," said Joanne Belmonte of Randolph, headed for South Station and greeted yesterday at 7:15 a.m. by a total of 8 armed, dark-uniformed officers at the entrance to the Holbrook commuter rail platform. "I'm not comfortable with it at all."

Police funneled more than 200 commuters through a single entrance to the platform at the Holbrook station, on the Randolph line about 15 miles south of Boston, and sealed off other entry points. They stopped every 11th passenger -- more than 20 people -- and brought them to a table where their bags were swabbed with a sensor pad that then was run through a General Electric explosive-

sensing machine. A bomb-sniffing dog was on hand to double-check any bag that tested positive. There were none that required that treatment.

The process took between five and 10 seconds. MBTA Police Chief Joseph Carter greeted passengers and explained the policy to them: All bags would be subject to search through next week during the Democratic National Convention. Searched riders also received a small white card detailing the policy.

Through the weekend, teams of officers will fan out to subway and train stations, as well as bus stops and ferry terminals and stop people on a random basis, Carter said. The policy will be stepped up on Monday, the first day of the convention, when every passenger with any type of carry-on item will be searched at certain locations, he said.

The T says the baggage inspections are necessary because federal authorities have warned that transit systems and cities hosting political conventions are likely terrorist targets this summer. About 1.1 million people use the system every weekday, making it impossible to check every passenger's bags.

Civil liberties groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts and the National Lawyers Guild, have threatened to sue over the policy, saying it violates the Fourth Amendment guarantee against unreasonable search and seizure, and predicting that passengers will ultimately be picked out for screening on the basis of their appearance and not at random.

In Salem this morning, a team of seven MBTA officers searched 100 of the 1,100 Boston-bound passengers headed for the platform. Shortly after 8 a.m., Roberta Brien of Salem was motioned over to the tables where the officers had set up the bomb-sensor machine.

"It's probably a necessary evil," said Brien, 32, an employee at the state Division of Capital Asset Management. "I don't have a choice really. I need to get to work. The commonwealth isn't giving us the next week off so we've got to do what we've got to do."

At the Holbrook station, the chief concern of most passengers was that the searches would make them miss their train, but commuter rail staffers held all trains for the people being searched. Most passengers said they had no problem with the searches.

"It was easier than I thought it was going to be. I thought they were going to open the bags up and look through all our personal belongings," said Amy Jones, 39, of Randolph. "I didn't like the idea when I first heard about it. I thought it was getting into profiling. And if they miss one bag -- that could be the bag."

The policy will be officially announced this afternoon at an as-yet-unnamed station in Boston.

Steven A. Rosenberg of the Globe staff contributed to this report from

Salem. ■

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